



MAG: Freeways vs. clean air

Kerry Fehr-Snyder

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A powerful group of leaders in Maricopa County is considering diverting money away from freeway expansion projects to beef up enforcement of air polluters.

The move comes amid threats that the state will lose hundreds of millions of dollars in federal freeway funds each year if it doesn't meet Environmental Protection Agency air-quality standards.

"We're going to lose an amount of money that's hard to estimate," Goodyear Mayor James Cavanaugh said at this week's executive committee meeting of the Maricopa Association of Governments. "Is there a way to put STAN funds into that?"

STAN is the Statewide Transportation Acceleration Needs account that would accelerate construction of various freeways. The STAN account has more than \$193 million, but much of that money is already earmarked for specific projects.

If Maricopa County isn't in compliance on federal air-quality rules for a dust known as PM-10, it will lose federal funds that are being counted on for those same freeway acceleration projects.

"That could be 10s of millions of dollars in a small city. It seems to me that (getting control of) PM-10 is more important than acceleration," Cavanaugh said.

With more than \$1 billion in federal highway funds at stake over the next five years, MAG leaders are eying STAN money to pave dirt roads and crack down on air-quality violators.

On Friday, the EPA and Arizona Department of Environmental Quality sent letters questioning how county leaders are spending money in light of the PM-10 problem.

MAG has already allocated \$5 million to step up enforcement of anyone who violates the PM-10 rule. That amount was matched by cities in the county, bringing the total fund to \$10 million for improved enforcement.

The biggest bang for the buck, MAG leaders agreed, is complying with PM-10 rules by paving dirt roads, which make up about 10 percent of the air-pollution emissions.

"We're going to be paving empty lots, buying sweepers," Cavanaugh said of Goodyear. "If we don't do that, those who follow us are going to regret it."

Peggy Neely, a Phoenix City Council woman and MAG member said she worries about emissions coming from motorists who kick up dust on state land in her district.

"The state is benefiting from the cities enforcing this," she said.